

Further Internet audio documentaries for your listening pleasure.



Modern Romance, Global Perspective's 2005 theme, presented by Australian Broadcasting Corporation, the BBC, the CBC, JoyFM, Radio Netherlands, Radio New Zealand, RTHK, and Soundprint.



## Audio documentary: a polemical introduction for the visual studies crowd

by [Chuck Kleinhans](#)

This is a presentation I made at the 12th Visible Evidence Conference in Montreal in August 2005 on a panel I co-chaired with Derek Paget titled, "Listen Up! The Sound of Documentary." I've decided to keep the spoken word tone and rhetoric for print publication because it conveys a key point about audio/oral delivery.

Before presentation, display:

<http://www.indymedia.org/en/index.shtml>

link to:

<http://liveradio.indymedia.org/>

[Indymedia is the premiere progressive alternative media source; a hub for hundreds of different sources — print, video, audio, etc. around the world. Started by activists involved in the Seattle WTO protests, it has expanded to many different social action issues.]

I want to personally thank the organizers of the conference for a wonderful event, so thoughtfully and industriously organized. [To Conference organizer, Tom Waugh] Tom, this is a terrific tribute to the long history of the Visible Evidence conferences. Translators, thanks for your help. It's a great pleasure to be here. Those of you who were able to attend the Monday afternoon workshop on community based media organizing, as well as yesterday afternoon's panel on socially committed work, will see many connections to what I'm saying here.

This panel began with a conversation between Derek Paget and myself at the last Visible Evidence conference about how especially, with the rise of visual culture studies, audio was being lost track of. Yet we both thought it was an important

World Health: another series by Global Perspectives



Teaching NOW! addresses issues in today's schools.



In May 2005, StoryCorps' first two MobileBooths embarked on cross-country journeys, collecting the stories of everyday Americans in towns and cities nationwide. People choose an interview partner, have forty minutes to tell their story, get a CD of it, and can put it in an archive in the Library of Congress. Permanent Story Booths are in Grand Central Station and Lower

part of the documentary tradition and experience, and, full story be told, that audio recording precedes cinematic recording. (Edison before Lumière.)

My specific concern with this paper is to convince everyone that audio documentary is fully worthy of study both in conjunction with visual documentary, that is as part of audiovisual work, and in its own right as a form that bears very strong resemblances to the aesthetic and practical issues of visual documentary, especially in its cinema and video forms.

So, I want to do three things this morning. One is to scold Visible Evidence participants for being ignorant of or avoiding thinking actively about audio documentary. [Wag finger.] OR to put it in positive terms, I want to make people aware of what is already going on. That leads to the second thing I want to do, which is to celebrate audio documentary today, and to give you an overview of what's happening. The third thing I want to do is give you an example of what audio documentary can do which in many cases makes it better--yes, I said better--than visual documentary. You might disagree--but hear me out. [Gesture, cup ear.] Yes, HEAR me out and SEE for yourself. [Gesture — make like binoculars — smile and wink.]

To dramatize this and tease you, let me play the opening of an award winning 1993 audio documentary, *Ghetto Life 101*, recorded by two young teenagers living in Chicago:

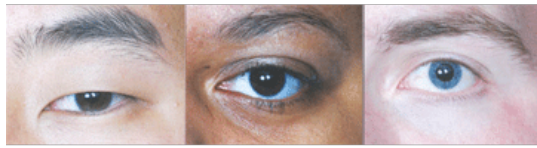
[http://www.soundportraits.org/on-air/ghetto\\_life\\_101/](http://www.soundportraits.org/on-air/ghetto_life_101/)  
[play 1.30 min]

This 30 minute piece is a wonderful “view from inside” that gives us a portrait of a community by revealing the two makers as they construct an audio diary. It was produced by giving the boys portable cassette tape recorders, quality mikes, and training them. They kept audio diaries and two weeks later the collected work was edited by them, along with professional sound editors, into the final version. The inconspicuous nature of cassette recorders, and the relative simplicity of use for recording allowed them to gather information, interview people they knew such as their teacher, and also gain entry to a downtown hotel and interview a basketball star from a visiting team. The learning curve for training in video and the nature of the equipment would have made this project much harder, more expensive, and complicated in that technology. So, appropriate technology contributes to timely project completion, imaginative investigation, and intimate



Manhattan in New York.  
[Listen to stories.](#)

## Color Complex



Racism and Communities of Color

[Color Complex](#), a series produced by Chicago's WBEZ, explores how racism and xenophobia play out within and between communities and how they intersect with other forms of social power such as class, caste, legal status, and gender.



Each year Third Coast Festival commissions four short docs on a theme. "Producers, reporters and audio artists may submit proposals ... and are encouraged to consider stories ranging from literal to metaphorical, narrative to sound-rich, cultural to political. 2005 - [Stories](#)

storytelling.

## Part one

I have a personal investment here because my own academic department, Radio, Television, and Film at Northwestern University, has long talked of changing its name. Personally I think names are fairly irrelevant terms of convenience, and the "politics of naming" is as silly as arguing a point from etymology. However almost all of my colleagues consistently ridicule "radio" when making the case for changing the department name to "media studies" or "visual cultures" or whatever. [We settled on Screen Cultures in fall 2005.] They point out that we no longer teach any courses in radio, though the department began as a subset of theatre concerned with radio dramatic writing and producing. This is partly true. Radio is included in other courses, such as my history of documentary courses, and the history of broadcasting, but it doesn't have pride of place. I once directed an MFA thesis project in radio, but that is the only time an MFA student offered audio as their primary creative medium.<sup>(1)</sup> And we haven't had a dissertation on radio for decades.<sup>(2)</sup> But, the ignorance of audio (a term I prefer, since we now live in a different universe than just radio as the main vehicle for transmitting audio) as art and practice is as widespread as the thoughtlessness which accompanies the amount of radio listening my colleagues do without self-conscious thought.

It is this thoughtless unawareness that irks me. So let me be polemic for a moment: how can people concerned with documentary, as at Visible Evidence, so consistently ignore the audio track of the films and videos they are discussing? Presumably we all know that television emerges out of radio broadcasting, that even such an exalted theorist as Theodor Adorno did his first work during his US exile writing for the scholarly media journal *Radio Research* <sup>(3)</sup> that video documentary has, from the arrival of the first portapaks in the mid-1960s, had audio always already present. Can I remind everyone that most video and film documentaries begin postproduction with the logging of shots and transcribing of audio, and then making of a "paper cut" which is built out of the transcribed audio? Can I remind everyone that the "subordinate" parts of a film or video documentary are referred to as "cutaways" that come from the "B roll" and are always and only visuals?

OK, OK, I think I made the point and I'll stop scolding. But what I want to do is make you aware of the importance to

[About Games](#). 2004 -  
[Stories about Darkness](#).  
2003 - [Stories about Thirst](#)



Walter Murch, sound designer for *The Conversation* and *Apocalypse Now*, with a [lecture, a conversation, and an original audio essay, Womb Tone](#), for [transom.org](#). The site's [Tools Section](#) offers a wealth of easy to understand instructional information for all aspects of audio and radio production, useful for teachers and for audio practitioners.



visual film and video documentary of audio as foundational, not superficial. And further, and most importantly, I want to argue for audio documentary in its own right, in the hopes that the next few Visible Evidence conferences will include people working primarily in audio documentary precisely because their work is exciting, innovative, and shares so much of the same terrain as regular Visible Evidence participants have engaged over the past 12 years.

Now, an important qualification: in point of fact, almost all of the world knows and understands radio documentary because they have state broadcasting institutions which have decades of experience in producing radio documentaries. Thus, Canada, Australia, and Britain all have broadcasting corporations that have a public service mission and (arguably) official support and financing to make that happen. They have long traditions, a fairly wonderful track record, a place in history, and innovative new work emerging from young producers. The situation in the U.S. is, as we all know, different since the Federal Communications Commission was established in the 1930s to regulate a totally commercially driven broadcasting system.

We might remember Brecht's essay on radio, where he, like Walter Benjamin, pointed out the radical potential of radio as the possibility for two-way communication. That promise was never kept as governments set the broadcasting model as the norm with a central authority, be that capitalist or commissar, determining what should be broadcast and then simply sending it out in a one way stream.

However, today, with new technologies, the terrain of audio and radio has changed. We need to remember that new technologies do not really replace old technologies in many cases, but rather they piggyback on them, move them into new alignments, and create new possibilities. This is what we are seeing today with the old commercial radio model in the US (with up to 22 minutes of every hour assigned to commercial advertising, and the remaining 38 to music and information or chatter). Today this is being challenged by developments such as these:

1. Satellite radio, a subscriber model with hundreds of channels available. While promoted as an alternative to commercial broadcast listening, it is already present (as a listening practice) in the
2. digital music choices of most television cable and dish delivery systems. Uninterrupted commercial free music



The Kitchen Sisters along with Jay Allison produce [Hidden Kitchens](#) to explore the world of street-corner cooking, hidden kitchens, legendary meals and eating traditions — finding out the ways that communities come together through food.



[Jeru — In the Words of Gerry Mulligan](#). An oral autobiography, from the Library of Congress' I Hear America Singing Collection.



Radio Diaries produces [Teenage Diaries](#), by giving

is the main content provided.

3. Internet radio is another choice people have, requiring a high speed connection, but providing access in the past five years or so to thousands of radio stations (both existing broadcast stations and virtual internet ones) around the world.
4. A new device, Radio Shark, functions as a TIVO for radio, recording vast amounts of audio and easily editing out commercial interruptions.
5. Digital sound editing software such as ProTools and Sound Studio serves both professionals and dedicated beginners with excellent resources for rapid work as well as complex effects.

All of these possibilities challenge traditional broadcasters, and are especially interesting as alternatives to the regulation environment of the FCC, given the merger and acquisition practices of the past decade which have crushed local markets and turned broadcasting into a national bland blend with centralized decision making and play list control.

But more to the point of creating an active alternative, we now have emerging forms of transmission, notably individual webcasting (roughly similar to text blogs) and podcasting, that is using MP3 players and similar technologies to create easily downloadable programming which is readily created and disseminated on the web, and connected with RSS [Real Simple Syndication] to alert subscribers to new materials. Very specific self-generated audiences and niche production allows for a custom experience.<sup>(4)</sup>

In short, new media changes are in the process of creating a different terrain, one that is amenable to alternative and independent audio.

What is the radical potential of this change for documentary practice? Well, against the seemingly overwhelming power of the established media, the vested interests, and the failure of elected and appointed officials to work for change, the grassroots--as always--has to find its own means and methods. Just as the rapid rise of the underground press in the 1960s counterculture and antiwar movements created a communications alternative by exploiting relatively inexpensive tabloid offset news printing, the creation of an alternate audio universe today is possible. The rapid expansion of the anti-Iraq-war movement would find this an important resource for organizing.

tape recorders to young people who conduct interviews, keep an audio journal and record the sounds of daily life—usually collecting more than 40 hours of tape in a year. They work with Radio Diaries editors to make programs for NPR. Especially valuable to anyone interested in audio production is their [Teen Reporter Handbook](#).



[Stories1st.org](#), a great site, includes both programs and a how-to guide. Under the link "words" you can find text versions of narratives, under "sound" you can find material to listen to. Also, a good archive. Listen to a [conversation with Ursula LeGuin](#).

**Stories1st.org**

Stories1st.org welcomes the personal narrative told in literary and audio art form

## Part two

To mark and celebrate the work that is available, I will discuss some US audio documentary and the resources that sustain it. There are many other institutions and examples internationally, but I'll start with what I know best. My home town, Chicago, has been a major center for the growth and development of audio documentary, marked especially by the presence of the National Public Radio outlet, WBEZ (5) which many of you may know through their syndicated show *This American Life* which collects mostly well told personal narratives by talented story tellers (the classic example, David Sedaris working as a department store Santa's Helper at Christmas). WBEZ also has more social documentary oriented work such as an annual theme oriented series, Chicago Matters, which produces a series of short to middle length investigative documentaries build around a theme such as housing, money, youth, or race relations. This is foundation-sponsored work which allows for risk taking and which airs within the NPR news cycle as local programming.

You can get a good sense of WBEZ from their website. [<http://www.wbez.org/>] Their website links to *This American Life*, and other useful resources. Four other sites are especially interesting in relation to documentary production and programming.

First is the Third Coast International Audio Festival at <http://www.thirdcoastfestival.org>. Third Coast sponsors an annual festival which is an important event, but also a competition, a conference for producers, public events, an extensive audio library archiving five years of work which is available online for free downloads. They also produce a show *Re:sound* which anthologizes work from around the (mostly English speaking) world.

Second is AIR, the association of independents in radio (<http://www.airmedia.org>) which provides member resources of people in and around public radio, including a useful set of member websites that let you explore more individual work. One of the most active AIR members, Jay Allison, produces series such as *This I Believe* (personal statements of values), *Lost and Found Sound* (recycling old recorded media such as wire recordings, transcriptions, and tape recordings documenting the past), and *Hidden Kitchens* (grassroots cooking and cuisine). <http://www.jallison.com/>

And third [Transom.org](#) which is especially strong on providing

... an experiment of the "I".  
Listen to [more personal narratives](#) from [Stories1st](#).

serious discussions (currently featuring an extended interview with Hollywood sound editor and sound designer Walter Murch) and tools and instruction and mentoring for beginners.

Fourth, StoryCorps (<http://storycorps.net/>) collects hour-long oral histories from ordinary people by sending mobile recording booths around the country to collect personal narratives (usually done with a family member or friend who conducts the interview). Short edited sections are available on the website and are broadcast on NPR.

Each of these is an invaluable resource for learning about audio in all its forms: public radio broadcasting, obviously, but with everything from grass roots and street level fieldwork, personal narratives, audio essays, soundscapes and experimental audio art.

## Part three

I want to conclude with a few clips from an audio documentary from SOUNDPRINT [<http://www.soundprint.org/>] that I think demonstrates the valuable and unique qualities of audio for documentary. *Practicing Emptiness* a 30-minute piece that works precisely better as audio than as audiovisual, because we DON'T see the faces and the narrators blend together. About women who in one way or another sell themselves to men to make a living, the piece demonstrates that a general social condition based in the conditions of patriarchy is what is being analyzed, not just the individual testimonials of these women. That is, the medium and form deliberately transcend the ideology of individualism that dominates in a bourgeois capitalist society.

Conclude with playing sections of [\*Practicing Emptiness\*](#):

[http://soundprint.org/radio/documentaries/display\\_desc/1/YEAR/2005](http://soundprint.org/radio/documentaries/display_desc/1/YEAR/2005)  
These sections were played: 5.00-7.10; 11.00-13.45; 15.00-15.5.

"Women sell themselves short doing things they hate in search of money or security or emotional fulfillment," says writer Carmen Delzell. For some this means staying in a bad marriage, to keep a roof overhead or for the children's sake; for some it means prostitution. Delzell shares conversations with women of diverse backgrounds — a former prostitute, a

woman who has suffered an abusive marriage, an exotic dancer — and reveals the threads that bind their experiences, and those of all women, together.

## Notes

- [1.](#) Karen Jefferson produced the series “Harlem Hit Parade” which combined original interviews of rhythm and blues and soul performers with performance recordings.
- [2.](#) James Schwoch, “The United States and the Global Growth of Radio, 1900-1930: in Brazil and the Third World,” diss. Northwestern U. 1985.
- [3.](#) Now buried in the basement of my university’s library where it must be recalled from storage.
- [4.](#) I won’t develop the point here, but there is an obvious downside to media production which aims exclusively at the already committed, as is often said of text blogging. Self-selection can produce an intense pertinence at the expense of a more generous and democratic perspective and a self-affirming stance at the cost of finding effective persuasive and rhetorically convincing forms and practices.
- [5.](#) WBEZ has a news and talk orientation during most of the broadcast day and a jazz format in the evening until dawn with other music appearing on weekends, along with some documentary. Chicago has a long news day, starting at 4 am to 9.30 and again 3.00pm to 6.30 with NPR, followed by business news and a jump to the WGBH-BBC hourly evening news.”